**Acts of the Apostles
A Study of New Testament History**
**Lesson 14
Acts 15:1 – 29**

**Introduction:**

The practice of circumcision was instituted as a means of ratifying the covenant between God and Abraham. God had promised to bless Abraham by making him the father of a great nation of people, and by eventually giving his descendants the land wherein Abraham dwelled.

*"I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."* (Genesis 17:6-14).

Essentially, the covenant required every male child to be circumcised on the 8th day, including male slaves of Hebrews and their male offspring. One purpose for this procedure was to make Israelites distinctly different from the heathen nations around them. Therefore, failure to comply with this command would result in excommunication or death, perhaps even both.

However, during the time when the Israelites were enslaved in the land of Egypt, circumcision had either been forbidden by the Egyptians or had fallen out of practice among the Israelites. Therefore, in keeping with the covenant God made with Abraham, Moses insisted that his son be circumcised to appease the anger of God (Exodus 4:24-26). The Law of Moses also specifically forbade any male from participating in the celebration of Passover unless he had been circumcised (Exodus 12:48). These are among the reasons why God commanded Joshua to have all Israelite men who had come out of Egypt be circumcised (Joshua 5:2-9) to roll away the *"reproach of Egypt."*

In the New Testament circumcision was faithfully practiced by devout Jews as recognition of God's continuing covenant with Israel. Both John the Baptist (Luke 1:59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21) were circumcised. However, controversy over circumcision soon divided the early church which now included believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. A crisis erupted in the church at Antioch when believers from Judea taught the brethren, *"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1-2). In effect, the men insisted that a believer from a non-Jewish background (Gentile) must first become a Jew ceremonially (by being circumcised) before he could be admitted into the fellowship of Jewish believers.

To address the matter, the apostles and elders convened in Jerusalem to resolve the issue (Acts 15:6-29). Among those attending were Paul, Barnabas, Simon Peter, and James. Peter argued that to insist on circumcision for the Gentiles would amount to a burdensome yoke for Gentiles to keep the entire Law of Moses (Acts 15:10). Therefore, it was the decision of those presiding over this matter to not bind Gentile converts to the practice of circumcision, thus effectively enabling the church to break with Judaism and Jewish practices and commandments contained in the Law of Moses.

**Memorization:**

*But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."* (Acts 15:5)

Key Events of Acts 15:

* Conflict arose over the need for Gentile converts to be circumcised
* The apostles and elders in Jerusalem come together to consider the matter of circumcision for Gentile

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**The Exposition:**

**I. Controversy Over Circumcision (Acts 15:1-5)**

**A. Paul and Barnabas dispute with Judaizing teachers (Acts 15:1-2)**

1. Where were Paul and Barnabas at this time?

2. What were those who had come from Judea teaching, and why would they teach this?

3. What was the reaction of Paul and Barnabas?

4. Why do you think Paul and Barnabas decided to take this matter to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem?

**B. Journey to Jerusalem (Acts 15:3-5)**

1. What territories did Paul and Barnabas pass through on their way to Jerusalem and what did they do?

2. What was the reaction of the brethren?

3. What did Paul and Barnabas do when they arrived in Jerusalem?

4. What did the Pharisee believers say about circumcision, and why would they be so insistent on requiring Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses?

**II. Apostles and Jerusalem elders consider the matter of circumcision of Gentiles (Acts 15:6-29)**

**A. The discussion (Acts 15:6-21)**

1. Why would the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem be the ones to consider this matter? (Read Matthew 18:18-20; Galatians 2:7-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

2. Who was Peter speaking about in verses 7-9? Cite the specific verses in Acts.

3. What proof did Peter offer to show that God accepted Gentiles without requiring them to be circumcised?

4. Why would requiring Gentiles to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses be considered a "yoke on the neck of the disciples"? (Consider Galatians 5:1-4).

5. How was the Law of Moses a "a yoke" which, according to Peter, "neither our fathers nor we were able to bear"?

6. How did Peter say we are saved? Explain what this means. (Consider Ephesians 2:1-10).

7. What evidence did Barnabas and Paul offer to prove God had accepted Gentiles without requiring circumcision?

8. Which James is mentioned in Acts 15:13, and explain why this James would have the authority to speak with such authority? (Consult a commentary).

9. What prophecy does James quote, and how does it support the claim that God accepts Gentiles?

10. How does James use this prophecy to show the timeframe when the Gentiles will be called by the Lord's name?

11. What does James propose, and why would he admonish Gentiles to abstain from these things? (Consider 1 Corinthians 8:10-13)

**A. The decision (Acts 15:22-29)**

1. What did the apostles and elders do, with the approval of the whole church?

2. Who accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Antioch?

3. Who was the letter from and to whom was it addressed?

4. What command had the apostles and elders in Jerusalem not given?

5. How are Paul and Barnabas described? What specific events would James be speaking about? Cite the verses.

6. Why did the apostles and elders in Jerusalem want to send certain men to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia?

7. What is implied by the statement, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things"?

8. Again, what were Gentile brethren told to abstain from, and what would be the result?

**Application:**Be prepared to discuss what lessons can learn from these events, and how those lessons can be applied to present-day situations.